



North Carolina Department of Administration

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Standard Operating Procedure **Veterans Service Centers**

This Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) provides basic procedures for the daily operation of Veterans Service Centers. These procedures provide new and established Veterans Service Officers (VSOs) and Veterans Service Technicians (VSTs) an operational procedure guide on various processes to ensure quality and accountability of service. **(Note: Items in each section specific to VSO's and VST's serving in VA Medical facilities are noted in bold print.)**

1. **Mission Statement**

The mission of the Veterans Service Centers are to serve the veterans within its area of responsibility, their dependents and survivors in all matters pertaining to veteran's affairs; provide guidance, assistance, and training to assigned County Veterans Service Offices as requested; and participate in area outreach opportunities in coordination with civic, educational, and other Veterans Service Organizations. **(Also included are the Veterans Service Officers (VSO's) and Veterans Service Technicians (VST's) serving in Veterans Affairs Medical Centers who serve the veterans within his/her range of responsibility, their dependents and survivors in all matters pertaining to veteran's affairs; provide education and collaboration with VAMC staff in order to provide the best service to the Veterans and their dependents.)**

2. **Authority**

North Carolina General Statute 165 provides for the establishment of the North Carolina Division of Veterans Affairs (NCDVA) and designated Veterans Service Centers describing the role in the representation of claimants for their lawful veterans benefits under Federal, State, local laws, rules, or regulations.

3. **Preface**

Veterans Service Centers within the authority and control of the NCDVA differ from location to location in that some Veterans Service Centers are physically located in VA Medical Facilities and may not have associated responsibilities to designated County Veterans Service Offices. **(Veterans Service Centers physically located within VA Medical Facilities will fall under all State and Federal Regulations and will adhere to the policies and procedures of the VA Medical Center, however they will not**

fall under any authority of the VA Medical Center but under supervision of the Office Manager and Regional Manager.)

4. **Customer Service**

A Veterans Service Center (VSC) **(the office space provided at the VAMC's is considered a VSC)** will maintain a high level of customer service; therefore, VSO/VST/PA IVs must always project a professional and courteous attitude to the client/claimant whether client/claimant is in person or on the telephone. The purpose of this office is to be an advocate for the veteran, their families, and their dependents in obtaining entitled benefits.

As Veterans Service Officers and Veterans Service Technicians, claims are filed for disability and death benefits on behalf of veterans and survivors. In addition to filing claims, we have the responsibility to provide advice and assist county veteran's service officers in the conduct of their duties. As a part of the assistance, we review claims prior to submission to the US Department of Veterans Affairs to insure accuracy and proper development unless that CVSO is accredited and authorized to submit claims directly to the VA. **(VSC's in VAMC's have the responsibility to communicate to county veteran's service officers in the cases of dual services. In these cases communication is mandatory with the appropriate County VSO in order to have an agreeable approach to that specific claim.)**

a. Attitude:

- 1) We are a Customer Service Agency; therefore, we must always project a professional and courteous attitude to the customer whether customer is in person or telephone.
- 2) The customer, veteran, dependent, or survivor is the reason we are here.
- 3) We do not have to take abuse either on the phone or in person. If this becomes the case, allow one of the VSOs to handle this situation. The VSOs have been trained to diffuse the situation. **(VSC's in VAMC's - In the case of this escalation the VSO/VST will contact the appropriate VAMC personnel and contact the Regional Manager in a timely manner.)**

b. Phone Policy: When a customer calls for information, provide them with the information they are requesting without violating any HIPPA Laws or disclosing any PII. Remember, you cannot see the Veteran and you must be able to verify who you are talking to before disclosing information. When a customer calls seeking an appointment to apply for VA benefits, ask the customer their location. Based upon where the caller lives provide the following information:

- 1) If the caller lives in one of the counties under the purview of the Veterans Service Center, professionally advise them, as a courtesy and convenience, of their option to utilize the County Veterans Service Office where they live. Always provide the caller with the phone number, address, and service officer's name if they elect to seek assistance from the referred County Veterans Service Office location. In all situations make an effort to refer the caller to his/her County Veterans Service Office. However, it is our policy to never turn away any veteran or veteran's family members even if they choose not to seek assistance from their County Veterans Service Office.

- 2) If the caller lives outside of the Veterans Service Center area, professionally advise them, as a courtesy and convenience, of their options to utilize the nearest Veterans Service Center Office or County Veterans Service Office based upon their location. Always provide them with the phone number, address, and service officer's name if they elect to seek assistance from the referred Veterans Service Center or County Veterans Service Office location. However, it is our policy to never turn away any veteran or veteran's family members even if they choose not to seek assistance from their Veterans Service Center or County Veterans Service Office.
- 3) If the customer asks or insists to come to your location, gladly provide them with the information and documentation they will need to successfully file a claim. Provide them with the working hours of the office and the policy by which the Veterans Service Center operates.
- 4) Document all phone calls, faxes, and emails as required for reporting.
- 5) In all situations, assistance to the veteran will always be based on the principle of doing whatever is in the veteran's best interest, meeting their requests, and exceeding their expectations of customer service.

5. **In-Office Contact Policy:**

The claimant/customer should be greeted promptly and courteously. Request they sign in. The claimant/customer should be asked the nature of their visit and asked to complete the sign in sheet.

Depending on the specific day, the customer should be given the opportunity to be worked in or make an appointment for return visit. At this time, the customer should be advised of the Veterans Service Office in the county of their residence and the convenience to them to receive their assistance at that location. In all situations make an effort to refer the customer to his/her County Veterans Service Office. However, it is our policy to never turn away any veteran or veteran's family members even if they chose not to seek assistance from their County Veterans Service Office.

If customer elects to go to county of residence, provide the veteran with contact information for their local Service Center or County VSO. As a courtesy, if you feel it's necessary due to the difficulty of the issue, special circumstances, claimant's attitude, etc. contact the applicable SC/CVSO of the impending visit. This may be done by phone or email.

If customer elects to seek assistance from this office, provide this assistance in a timely and professional manner.

Do not hand out forms for the veteran to complete until you have offered to assist with completing the forms and they understand what to do with the completed form. It's best to assist the veteran in completing all forms regardless of the simplicity.

When a veteran is seeking enrollment in VA Healthcare, do not refer him to the DVAMC or local CBOC to complete VA Form 10-10EZ until after you have talked with him. Discuss the reason he's seeking

health care. He may just want a merchant discount or you may find he served in Vietnam and needs treatment for diabetes. By sending a veteran away immediately, you miss the opportunity to explain VA medical as well as other benefits to the veteran or survivor. A detailed interview may uncover eligibility for other possible benefits and/or services. Some of the other considerations before you send him away on his own are; where you are sending the veteran (down the street or 80 miles away), can the VA medical facility you are sending the veteran to actually intake 1010EZs; is the veteran actually capable of making such a trip (mobility, transportation, healthcare problems should be a factor). We realize how much easier and quicker it can be for the veteran to go to one or more of these VA Medical Facilities but, other factors must be considered. As always, consider what is the veteran's intent, desire, and in their best interest.

Keep copies of correspondence submitted to the VA except medical evidence. DO NOT maintain medical evidence in the office files.

Never turn a customer away! Never give the customer the impression you are not willing to assist him/her!

6. **County Assistance/Visitation Policy:**

NCDVA, County, and Tribal VSO's across North Carolina have a long history of working together to provide our veterans the best service in the nation. The desire is for this tradition to continue far into the future. With continued mutual support, interaction, and respect we *will* become the most veteran friendly state in the nation.

Any County or Tribal VSO needing assistance should first contact their local Service Center Manager. If they are unavailable or unresponsive after a reasonable amount of time, contact the local Regional Manager.

The local Service Center Manager shall report any serious incidents or manning issues to the Regional Manager.

Keep the Regional Manager informed!!! Don't let something fester until it explodes or shows up on the 11 o'clock news.

Service Center Manager and Regional Manager visits to CVSO's will be determined by need and the desires of the county being visited. The SCM will solicit input from each county in their area prior to scheduling their monthly travel. Counties may request monthly visits, weekly visits, no visits, visits to assist with difficult cases, or visits for other assorted reasons. Counties may request a visit one month but not the next month. Visits should be considered as an opportunity for a two-way exchange of information. Often, sharing special circumstances, claim decisions, methods, shortcuts, contact numbers, etc. can help other offices if we have a free exchange of information.

7. **Office Set Up**

An office should provide for private conversations as not to violate HIPAA or PII laws when verbal counseling on US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Benefits. Keep claimant files and documents out

of sight of other claimants. You are a government representative employed by the State to assist veterans and their dependents to acquire various federal VA benefits via a claim process.

(VSC's in VAMC's - In the MOA the VA Medical Center will provide office space as well as the following supplies:

a. Office Equipment:

- 1) Desk**
- 2) Chair**
- 3) Phone**
- 4) Fax machine**
- 5) Computer Equipment**
- 6) Internet Access with VA access**
- 7) Copier**
- 8) File cabinets for hard copy file management**

b. Office Supplies (To be provided by Service Center Office)

- 1) Paper, pens, files, labels, etc.**
- 2) **Secure data base (preferred on a remote server) for electronic file management***
- 3) Supply of VA Forms, pamphlets, and brochures. A list of required forms for each benefit is located in the NCDVA training manual. Service offices may substitute office computer generated forms as possible only if these forms meet the benefit originating agency's standards.**

**Need only if use electronic program, paperless office, etc.)*

c. Office Equipment:

- 1) Desk**
- 2) Chair**
- 3) Phone**
- 4) Computer Equipment**
- 5) Internet Access with E-Mail Account**
- 6) Multipurpose Copier/Fax/Scan/Printer**
- 7) Office Supplies:**
- 8) Paper, pens, printer/copier ink, files, labels, etc.**
- 9) File cabinets for hard copy file management**
- 10) *Secure data base (preferred on a remote server) for electronic file management****
- 11) Access to VA Forms, pamphlets, and brochures**

Note: A list of required forms for each benefit is located in the NCDVA training manual.

**Need only if use electronic program, paperless office, etc.*

d. Office Support and Resources:

- 1) NCDVA Directory***
- 2) Medical Dictionary***

- 3) Current NCDVA Training Manual*
- 4) 38 CFR and 38 USC Code Books on VA Benefits (specifically Book B and C)*
- 5) Support from IT Department

*It is desired that these documents be accessible electronically (on-line or installed on the individual's desktop/laptop)

8. **Administrative Support**

Each Veterans Service Center, Veterans Service Officer, and Veterans Service Technician should expect to operate as a standalone counselor. There is no expectation that administrative support will be available to assist with the filing of claims, answering telephones, running copies, scanning copies, receiving mail, sending mail, faxing documents, or preparing reports that are required. This will be the responsibility of the Veterans Service Officer and/or Veterans Service Technician.

9. **Schedule:**

VSC's will maintain the NCDVA office hours of 8:00 am -5:00 pm, however upon discretion of the Regional Manager client hours may be adjusted in order to make time for administrative work.

(Service Centers located in VA Medical facilities - The NCDVA holiday schedule will be honored but, on holidays in which the VAMC honors is different, the VSC's located in VAMC's will not operate but regular work hours will be kept in the VSC's.)

10. **Claims Processing**

After formal training and initial On-the-Job-Training (OJT), a VSO/VST should be proficient in three main areas:

- a. Client/Claimant Interview
- b. Claims Development
- c. Follow-up

Note: File all claims using currently established procedures. Client/ Claimant information is to be protected under HIPAA, VA, and NCDVA confidential policies).

- a. Interview:
The interview is conducted to identify exact nature of contact. (Interviews can be accomplished over the phone or in person. In person is the preferred method.)
- b. Initial Office Visit:
 - 1) Basic ID and contact information must be recorded to include name, address, phone numbers, social security number, military service number, date of birth, date enlisted, date discharged from service (if more than one period, list each period separate), branch of service, character of discharge (run copy of DD 214 for file at this time), dependents, marital status, dependents' social security numbers, and occupation.
 - 2) Document if veteran has filed a claim for benefits previously and nature of claim and where filed – city and state.
- c. Client/Claimant Needs and Appropriate Benefits/Assistance

- 1) Identify what the client/claimant is seeking or needs and then identify the appropriate benefit or assistance
 - 2) Listen with guided empathy and genuine concern.
 - 3) The client/claimant may be seeking assistance other than VA; if so, be prepared to refer to correct agency to assist veteran or client with needs. Have list of local agencies, such as Social Services, Social Security, Employment Security Office, Legal Aid, emergency aid agencies, child support, etc.
 - 4) For VA benefits, discuss the basic eligibility requirements for each benefit separately. All other benefits refer to appropriate agency.
 - 5) After interview process, decide on which VA claim to file.
- d. File a formal claim or informal claim?
- 1) Informal claim – Follow informal claim policy
 - 2) Formal claim – Use appropriate form(s) for benefit sought.

11. **Claims Development**

- a. Fact and Document Gathering:
- Below are documents needed for compensation and pension benefits:
- 1) DD Form 214 or equivalent
 - 2) Service Medical Records if in client/claimant's possession
 - 3) VA Form 21-22 (POA in favor of NCDVA) must be signed and dated
 - 4) Service Personnel Records if in client/claimant's possession
 - 5) Disability diagnosis – If private provider, complete VA Form 21-4142; if VA Medical Center (VAMC), may use VA Form 21-4138 to request VA obtain this evidence giving dates of treatment and location of VAMC (If this information isn't included on 21-526 or other claim form.) . Use of the appropriate DBQ completed by either source (private or VA medical) may help expedite the claim.
 - 6) Dependent ID information – full name, social security number, date of birth; if married, need date and place of marriage and number of previous marriages by spouse and veteran.
 - 7) Copies of marriage certificate, birth certificate(s) of dependent children, divorce decrees for all previous marriage(s) if applicable, death certificate(s) if applicable.
 - 8) If non-service connected pension, will need verification of income, social security 1099s, if applicable, and net-worth.
 - 9) Other documents as needed depending on the benefit claiming

The above documents can be discussed over the phone in preparation for the office visit.

Note: Do not hold up filing the claim waiting for documents except for DD-214

- b. **Service Centers located in VA Medical facilities are expected to maintain the same integrity, and customer service standards listed in this SOP for local Service Centers and CVSO's. These Service Centers are located in the heart of veteran high-traffic areas and are expected to see a large number of veterans requesting assistance. This presents these offices with unique challenges while serving a large number of veterans.**

- 1) **The number of veterans visiting these service centers may impact your ability to file claims.**
- 2) **If the veteran has all necessary information and time/office traffic permit; file original Fully Developed Claims or Supplemental claims. If a claim is filed, explain to the veteran to follow-up with his local Service Center or CVSO. Contact the vet's local Service Center or CVSO, advise them of what you've done for the veteran, and send them copy of the claim.**
- 3) **If time/office traffic doesn't permit filing the claim, as a minimum, provide the veteran with contact information for his local Service Officer. If possible, call the local office to make an appointment for the veteran or to determine a good time for the vet to see/contact the local office.**

The intent is to provide a service to the veteran, to get his claim started, or provide a contact for someone near his home who can assist him. This office is expected to have a lot of initial contacts with veterans for referral to their local office who will build long-term relationships with the veteran. Having materials (local office business cards, directions to local offices, a flyer with several county/state office locations, etc.) on hand to give the veteran may be beneficial. We're plowing new ground here and expect a bountiful harvest.)

12. **Informal Claim: (Protects the claim for one (1) year)**
 - a. If documents are not available, file an informal claim to protect the effective date.
 - b. If last couple of days of the month, file an informal claim to protect the effective date.
 - c. VA Form 21-22 must be dated same date or earlier date of informal claim.
13. **Formal Claim:**
 - a. If have DD 214 and dependent information, file the formal claim; give client/claimant list of what is needed to return.
 - b. If last couple days of the month, file an informal claim along with the formal claim to protect the effective date.
 - c. Follow instructions of appropriate form for benefit(s) sought.
 - d. Make sure the claimant/client signs and dates the appropriate form. (Never hold a signed claim on your desk! If signed, send to VA via established mailing procedures.)
14. **Create Office Claim File:**
 - a. The office claim file is an unofficial file used to keep copies of actions taken by the VSC or CVSO as well as copies of all VA correspondence related to the claim. **(Operations in VAMC's will not house personal claims files. Any files that have jurisdiction of NCDVA will be taken and filed in the Regional Service Center or sent to the appropriate CVSO.)**
 - b. This file is confidential.
15. **Follow-up - Used in Conjunction with Diary System:**

- a. Each VSO/VST should follow up on all claims that affect the claimant's money. In order to do this, the VSO/VST shall maintain a diary system of claims for benefits (to include non-VA related) in order to stay informed of the benefit application processing.
- b. The purpose is to insure the VA receives the claim;
- c. Insure proper development of claim;
- d. Diary System:
 - 1) A system should be designed to track claims received by VA:
 - 2) The primary method of tracking claims will be VBMS. Check in the VA computer system to ensure claim is established.
 - 3) Use 60 days as limit to verify claim is established in VA system
 - 4) Annotate progress notes; re-diary as necessary.
- e. The type of Diary System can be:
 - 1) Microsoft outlook calendar or available calendar on user's computer;
 - 2) Monthly desk calendar
 - 3) Index cards
 - 4) Excel spreadsheet
 - 5) Any other simple system that works.
- f. Types of claims to diary:
 - 1) Compensation, original and re-opened;
 - 2) Non-Service Connected Pension;
 - 3) Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC), this includes: surviving spouse, surviving dependent children with no surviving spouse, and parents;
 - 4) Eligibility Verification Report Forms (EVRs);
 - 5) VA Form 21P-8416 used to submit Unreimbursed Medical Expenses (UMEs);
 - 6) NCDVA Scholarships;
 - 7) Any other correspondence that relates to a claim that affects the claimant's money.

16. **Outgoing Mail Process (Update pending policy review)**

NOTE: All claims should be mailed to the State Service Office using established NCDVA policy. The NCDVA mail processes (Outgoing and Return) are currently in a state of flux. These sections will be updated during the first SOP review.

- a. All claims that are "tied" to money should adhere to the transmittal policy.
- b. The claim will have two cover sheets (transmittals). The SSO shall review, sign off, and obtain a VA date stamp on both cover sheets, returning one cover sheet to the designated VSC(s) in each Region
- c. The Veterans Service Center VSO/VST will review for accuracy, signing off and mailing to the State Service Office (SSO). The PMC claims correspondence will be addressed to the Philadelphia Pension Maintenance Center but transmitted through the SSO for the VA date stamp. The VA Regional Office will then transmit these claims to PMC.
- d. All other claims, medical (10-10s), 180s, education, Champ-VA, Life Insurance, SBP/DFAS, Presidential Certificate, 26-1880 may be mailed directly to appropriate address.

17. **Return Mail Process (Update pending policy review)**

- a. The designated Regional VSC(s) will receive mail from the SSO for processing.
- b. The designated Regional VSC shall send cover sheets to their final destination-originating SC or originating CVSO as applicable. It should be noted: The only claims that will receive a

VA date stamp are those claims that are routed through the Regional Office in Winston Salem which are usually compensation, non-service connected pension living and deceased, DIC, burial claims.)

18. **Faxing Informal Claims:**

- a. All informal claims will be faxed to the SSO using proper format.
- b. The SSO will obtain a VA date stamp on the original and route back to the VSC.

19. **E-Mail**

- a. **Basics:** It is the policy of this Veterans Service Center to ensure all electronic mail generated or received meets the following criteria:
 - 1) Electronic mail messages, including attachments, should be used as much as possible to conserve resources, to reduce operating costs and to minimize unnecessary meetings.
 - 2) Electronic mail messages are covered within the definition of "public records" in G.S. 132-1. Where appropriate, E-mail may be exempt from disclosure as a confidential document – for example, certain communications by legal counsel, personnel records, and other legal exceptions to public record disclosure.
 - 3) All E-mail is the property of the Division. Employees should not have any expectations of privacy in the use of E-mail, except as previously noted with regard to established exceptions to public records disclosure.
 - 4) E-mail is intended for use for official State business and matters within the scope of employment, broadly defined.
- b. **Guidelines:**
 - 1) Assume your E-mail messages are being read by people other than the addressee. There is no reasonable expectation of privacy for e-mail messages. You never want to read your email in the newspaper as part of an article about our Agency.
 - 2) Remember that the messages are permanent and that transcripts can be taken out of context after you've forgotten the message.
 - 3) Take care in phrasing messages. Don't use e-mail to express strong emotions and be careful about humorous expressions, because they look different in print.
 - 4) Change your password often, never give it out, and consider handling confidential communications outside e-mail if at all possible.
 - 5) Be careful that you do not send mail to the wrong person when you select a name from address lists. Be very careful with distribution lists.

20. **Smoking:**

- a. The use of tobacco products are prohibited in Veteran Service Centers and State owned vehicles. Tobacco product use will be allowed in designated areas and will be discarded in the receptacle provided in the smoking area. Smoking of cigars, cigarettes and pipes by employees and visitors shall be prohibited in VSC offices. Additionally, no person shall smoke or carry a lighted cigarette, pipe or cigar in any of the following areas:
 - 1) Public rest rooms
 - 2) Hallways
 - 3) State Owned Vehicle

- b. All smoking will be conducted in designated areas and smoking products will be discarded in the receptacle provided in the smoking area.
- c. Any person who continues to smoke in a nonsmoking area following notice by the office manager that smoking is not permitted shall be reported to the Director's Office for appropriate disciplinary action. This policy complies with Chapter 143, Article 64 of the NC General Statutes. Refer to Department of Administration Policy GA-011.

21. **Requesting Vacation and/or Sick Leave:**

- a. When an employee wishes to request time off from work, he/she should complete the vacation/sick leave request form in hard copy and turn it in to their immediate supervisor for approval. There are established procedures for entering time data into the BEACON system. This system is operated by the State of NC and provides the employee a computerized system of entering work time, vacation leave and sick leave, etc. All office employees are required to input their 'time' into the BEACON system as appropriate. Additional information regarding time/leave can be obtained at the State Employee website.
- b. The Veteran Service Center Manager in coordination with the Regional Manager will ensure adequate office personnel coverage is available for mission accomplishment in each VSC. The Regional Manager will consult with their Regional VSC's, VSO's before elevating to the next higher level. Exhaust all resources in your Region before going outside. If need be, contact the Field Service Operations Manager if resources are not available within your Region. The Field Service Operations Manager can allow cross coordination with other regions.

22. **Acceptance of Gifts or Benefits of Any Kind:**

- a. No NCDVA employee may receive any benefit either directly or indirectly from any veteran, veteran's family members, or vendors of any type for services rendered or information provided. These benefits include but are not limited to any rebate, gift or otherwise, money or anything of value whatsoever or an obligation, or contract for future reward or compensation from any person, or vendor.
- b. Any food or food stuff brought into the office by a veteran or any member of a veteran's family will be positioned in the reception area so as to be available to anyone who enters the office. Food or food stuff cannot be designated for any one individual within the office.
- c. A violation of this policy could result in a criminal indictment.

23. **Public Disclosure:**

- a. No employee shall discuss or disclose any information regarding a claimant's claim (pending or completed), rating decision, or ***any*** medical information (including cause of death) with the public, to include the news media, even with a proper release of information signed by the claimant authorizing this agency to disclose such information. HIPPA rules concerning disclosure of an individual's informal remain in effect for 50 years past their death.
- b. The claimant has the option to discuss his or her claim with anyone they chose, but our obligation is to the claimant and the integrity of the claim. Discussing a pending claim is not in the best interest of the claimant as it may jeopardize final adjudicative action by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

- c. Each employee shall notify the Assistant Secretary of Veterans Affairs/Director or Assistant Director of NCDVA, Raleigh, NC if contacted by the news media for an interview. The employee shall provide complete details of the news media's request. The Department of Administration has a policy of being notified anytime the news media contacts an employee requesting information.
- d. Each employee shall notify the Assistant Secretary of Veterans Affairs/Director or Assistant Director of NCDVA, Raleigh, NC if contacted by a General Assembly or Legislative member or members of their staff. The employee shall provide complete details of the contact by completing the attached form (NCDVA-30) and returning it to the ASO immediately. Refer to Department of Administration Policy GA-030.

Effective Date:

This Veterans Service Center Office Standard Operating Procedures is effectively immediately and will remain in force until authorized changes or cancellations are made hereto.